



## Custer County Commissioners Back Statewide Radio Network

By Amanda Breitbach Ragsdale

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The Custer County Commissioners voted Tuesday to pledge their support of the Interoperability Montana project, which is working to establish a compatible, connected public safety radio system across the state.

The commissioners' pledge of \$3,000 to Interoperability Montana comes with the condition that counties already covered by the project also contribute pledges.

Ian Marquand, director of public affairs and outreach for the project, visited with county officials last week, describing a "short-term survivability proposal" intended to get the project through difficult financial times.

As state and federal budgets have tightened, Marquand said funds for administration of Interoperability Montana have dried up. To sustain the effort through the next six months, the project's board of directors is asking each jurisdiction where equipment or services have been provided to pledge \$3,000 in support. If 27 of approximately 30 jurisdictions being asked agree to contribute, raising \$81,000, it will enable the project to continue through the next Legislative session, he explained.<sup>1</sup>

Custer County Sheriff Tony Harbaugh expressed support for the request, noting that Interoperability Montana has given the county three repeaters, valued between \$20,000 and \$30,000 each.

"I'm in favor of contributing the \$3,000, because I believe we've received much more than that," Harbaugh said, adding, "Even if it doesn't get completed, I think we will be well served with the equipment that we have received."

Fire Chief Bud Peterson also spoke in favor of the project, citing the huge increase in radio use in the Helena area, where communication lines are complete.

"It must work if Helena went from 400 radios to 2,200," he stated.

Jim Zabrocki, the county's Disaster and Emergency Services coordinator, argued against the proposal.

"I would suggest you don't give them anything," he said, raising concerns about the project's future. Zabrocki said he felt Interoperability Montana was on the verge of collapse because the board had failed to attain sustainable funding.

"Three thousand dollars isn't a lot of money," he noted, "but if we get tagged year after year after year, it will be a lot of money."

Undersheriff Pat Roos and Commissioner Vicki Hamilton also questioned whether the financial support would be a one-time request.

Marquand told the group last week he could not promise Interoperability Montana would not have to ask for funds again, but said the board hopes the Montana Legislature will approve formation of an interim study committee that could find more permanent funding.

In addition to the interim study bill, funding support is essential now because \$2 million in Homeland Security grant money awarded to Interoperability Montana is being held up, waiting for a report on fiscal year 2011, Marquand told county officials.

Ultimately, the commissioners decided to approve the \$3,000 pledge of support, contingent on the support of other jurisdictions that already have radio service.

"I feel it's very important to have everybody involved in this thing," said Commissioner Jack Nesbit.

A grassroots effort, started in 2005, Interoperability Montana's goal is to create a compatible, connected statewide public safety radio system, linking emergency responders in all 56 counties. Grants, largely from the Department of Homeland Security, funded construction of microwave towers along the state's northern border, and work is also complete in areas of the western and central parts of the state. Projects to connect eastern and southern Montana communities are planned but not yet complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: The funding will enable the project to continue through the next fiscal year.